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At Land

Aritha van Herk

- 1 And who said it was uncomfortable here, in this pleated space full of augury and auspice, replete with the aromatic juices of a digesting whale? Dark yes, and damp, dripping from the ceiling. But disagreeable? Far less than the cloud I wandered through on my way to Tarshish, far less malevolent than the icy water that I flailed around in, drowning, before that gate of teeth opened wide and swallowed me whole, saving me from my inescapable fate.
- 2 But wait. I am sailing the prairie, steering this leviathan between Winnipeg and Calgary, where I will step out of its mouth between the same picket teeth onto dry land, spewed after a journey that has rescued me from swimming. The truth is, I cannot swim, the truth is that I have a desperate fear of water, hydrophobia, which is the same as the other hydrophobia, more commonly called rabies, and not archaic at all. The incidence of hydrophobia (which brings about severe thirst, a desire to drink and drink, although attempts to drink induce violent, painful spasms in the throat) is extremely rare, a disease that fewer than 0.05 per 1,000,000 of the Canadian population suffer from. The same is not true of hydrophobia, which is common at land, particularly on the prairies, rather like the motion sickness that afflicts those traversing large bodies of water. Seasickness manifests itself through uneasiness, headache, in severe cases distress, excessive sweating, salivation, pallor, nausea, and vomiting. The sight of food worsens the condition. At sea then. Amend the same symptoms to this land, this western sea of grass, undulating in its own billow. We suffer, here in the west, from hydrophobia, the dry wallows of the cows, the shy sloughs, the thinning Battle River no bigger than a wrist, the shrivelled dugouts, offering no chance to learn the beat of arms and legs as a flotation device against liquid.
- 3 This affliction may explain why I cannot swim. I cannot swim because I cannot swim, and one follows the other as surely as an arabesque within a ballet. I drown because I drown. I once tried to drown and almost drowned, but was saved, pulled from the bottom of Buffalo Lake by a classmate who was not hydrophobic, who knew the effect of stepping into one of the sudden holes in the lake's uneven bottom. He was in love

with me too, or perhaps I was in love with him, but after the rescue we were both too embarrassed to proceed with our desire. Teenagers drown more readily than most.

4 So, call me Jonna.

5 Because I almost drowned, I am afraid of water, and now, although I have never taken swimming lessons, I am too afraid to take lessons in drowning prevention. But I almost drowned because I had never learned to swim, and if I had had that advantage, if I had known even the most rudimentary paddling techniques, I might have been able to turn my own drowning to advantage, and instead of being drowned by drowning, I would have resorted to a few lazy kicks, and floated on the surface of that treacherous element in that treacherous lake. But I grew up on the grassy plain of Canada, where learning to swim as drowning prevention was laughable. No one was going to swim in those green-algaed and murky sloughs, muddy down to the centre of the earth. No one was going to swim in the iron coffin of the cattle trough. No one was going to swim in the spring-tadpoled ditches. No one was allowed to swim in the dugout. No one could imagine swimming in the Battle River—there wasn't enough river to make water. We swam ritually, once a year, at our annual school outing to Buffalo Lake—a lake perfectly traceable from the air as the outline of a buffalo (that dry land animal that swam in dust, that bathed in prairie wool), which the first peoples didn't need an airplane to recognize—and that was the sum of our swimming. No wonder then, that the incidence of hydrophobia is more than ten to one hundred people on the prairies. It might be considered endemic.

6 By training and profession, I am a cetologist, and until last March, I worked at Sea World on the West Coast. It was a job I loved, for although I cannot swim, I splash quite happily. Working with the whales was a matter of being mightily splashed and of rewarding them with fish when they jumped and dived in reasonable form. But we all know what has happened as a result of the upsurge of interest in animal welfare. "Those big animals shouldn't be swimming in such small pools, they must certainly be unhappy." Of course they were unhappy, I can vouch for that. But, apocryphal or not, Sea World was closed, and now I row my boat between wheat fields that ripple as well as any blue water, between the crisp heads of barley, between the yellow waves of canola, the mesmerizing TransCanada, which provides as much motion sickness as any sea.

7 So call me Jonna.

8 My common-law husband's name is Glass, and he has tried many times to teach me to swim. In chlorine-suffused swimming pools, in the sulphurous Upper Hot Springs (although there are rules against splashing), in the ice splinters of the Bow River (too shallow to be effective), even in the wave-tossed coastal waters of Australia and Hawaii, both islands we have visited. Strangely enough, hydrophobia is relatively rare on such atolls; the thirsty disease is primarily continental.

9 Although our travels are pleasurable, the swimming is always a failure, and Glass is a man who prides himself on success. "Come on, Jonna," he shouts above the water's roar, trying to keep me afloat with a hand under my back. "Just kick, gently."

10 I kick, obedient.

11 "That's right, just hold your breath, you can do it."

12 He has a tendency to sing his encouragements into my ear, which does not help my concentration. I cannot stand shouts or snuffles, wet tongues or water, in my ears. But I

thrash, and although I try desperately to hold air in my lungs to stay buoyant, I sink, as surely and inexorably as a human stone. And then, drowning, need to be rescued again.

13 To give Glass credit, he has never stopped trying, and every visit that we make to water's unstable element requires another attempt. Although perhaps he grows discouraged: lately he has been leaving Continuing Education pamphlets around the house, advertising courses on macramé and vegetarian cooking, and yes, swimming for "puddle ducks" and "absolutely terrifieds."

14 "I am not terrified," I protest.

15 "But you are afraid of water."

16 "Not completely. I shower. I drink it. Just afraid of drowning."

17 "Same difference, Jonna."

18 "No, it's not. There is a metaphysical difference."

19 Which is lost on Glass, who rolls his eyes, and maintains a circumspect silence. That is what I get for settling down with an Aquarius; it's a truism that they always pursue the impossible. Still, Glass is what my friends call a keeper, and I am trying to keep him, so I persist with trying to swim as a behaviour modification of my own. Alas, with no success.

20 So what am I doing here, in the belly of all bellies, the belly of a whale. Such a chimera seems impossible, a whale afloat on the prairie. But there have been boats and boat builders here before, dreaming of floods. Why should there not be a whale or two, with an abdomen, a deep interior cavity large enough to accommodate a hydrophobic woman? Let me assure you, I am not running away from Glass and his well-meaning attempts to teach me to float. I am not running away from my own joblessness as a cetologist on the prairies. I am not running away from my own discomfiture with life, with myself, with my name, with my calling as one who brings, by her mere presence, misfortune upon others.

21 I am capable of drawing diagrams of ships, of sketching on a block of paper the language of shipping and sailing. If you outline the shape of a ship—which is also the shape of a fish without its tail—and if you draw an imaginary line through the centre of this ship at right angles, you will be able to name the cross of its directives. Anything behind the line is abaft, astern of the middle, behind the main. Anything at right angles, to right or to left, is abeam. Stick to the bow, ride with the ship into its path. This knowledge might help to prevent seasickness. Although he can swim well, Glass is prone to terrible and stomach-heaving seasickness, while I, hydrophobic me, can sail and sail and sail. My strategy lies in knowing that the deck under my feet is solid, as compared to the watery element it cleaves. Here now, in this manzanilla darkness, I reflect on my own steady stomach, and how it came to occupy this *mise en abyme*, of a belly within a belly. I appear to share this space with a stingless *acalepha* or jellyfish, what feels like multiple strands of rubbery dulce, and a few fightless swordfish who nose one another and bump against my body with gentle inquiry. At least I am not gasping for air in the element that comprises ninety-nine percent of the molecules in my body, but which I cannot think of as hospitable.

22 Glass will raise his eyebrows quizzically and ask me how I came to be in such a position.

23 "It wasn't a literal whale," I will answer.

24 "You mean it was a Cadillac."

- 25 “No, stupid. It was a whale, or at least, I’ve decided to call it a whale, although other people have called it a fish or a sea monster.”
- 26 “You mean it was an imaginary whale.”
- 27 “Oh no, it was real enough, just not literal.”
- 28 “But there’s no difference.”
- 29 “There is a metaphysical difference.”
- 30 This is when Glass will throw up his hands, and go out to the porch with a beer, where he will sit and glower at the mountains to the west until it is too dark to read them, and he resorts to what stars and constellations he can manage to pick out despite the halo of streetlights. Glass is essentially a patient man, just not quite ready for the movements I make, from land to ship to water to whale and back to land again, as if my hydrophobia were chronic.
- 31 But how do I breathe, here inside the cavity of the whale? Whether this being is at sea or at land, I am nonetheless enclosed within its enclosure, airless. I discern that I am breathing—if you can call it breathing—through a kind of umbilical cord arrangement, which pulses oxygen, pure and heady, into my system. So who does the thinking here, I or the whale? Fish tale, human head, fish tail, whale womb. Philistines and Dagon, the heathen foes, the ill-behaved and ignorant, outsiders. This whale has just sailed from Jena—somehow it conveys its global journeys to me—from Jena, which was once in East Germany and is now simply in Germany, a city resurrecting itself, rising into a claim of change and restoration (they say the German *Philister* arose from Jena’s 1693 fight between students and townsmen, famous for its bloodshed, when an academic preacher proclaimed that the Philistine townspeople were upon the university). There now, in Jena, the square is being resurrected, and although the tower of the university, affectionately called the *Keksrolle*, cannot be dismantled, it looks forlorn in its modernity, a Babel rearing above the ancient and venerable city. But unification could not swallow its own solution, and the east of Germany still crouches in the belly of the west, sourly, a source of heartburn. Through the Berlin Wall, *ein Loch in der Mauer*, the whale sailed, stately, imperial, a mother, *Die Wende*. Straight through the skies between Europe and North America, over Hudson’s Bay, to splash down in Lake Winnipeg ready to incubate me. Apparently there is a hole in the bottom of the sea, although I am less convinced of the log and the bump on the log and the frog on the bump, and so on and so forth. In fact, I sympathize with Philistines and outsiders, workers rather than subscribers to the arrogant industries of culture, but those considered base, materialistic, craving thanks and appreciation. They too drown, and by drowning are swallowed.
- 32 These philosophies come to me through the umbilical cord of the whale cruising me gently across the short-grass prairie that is disappearing so quickly, heir to the ruthlessness of cattle. I can hear coyotes howling, the chirp of gophers and the rustle of wheat, even here within these walls of blubber. Far away is the wail of a train whistle in the night, and sometimes there is the quick strike of lightning and its rotund accompaniment by thunder. In the womb, all sound is magnified, enlarged, so although I rest in darkness, here in my three-day retreat, I can hear the world we pass through as clearly as if I were walking on dry ground.
- 33 Three provinces, three days, from Winnipeg to Calgary. The giantess who carries me ignores the artificial division of this landscape into political pieces. Three days entails a

comfortable travel-gait, and that we manage about one province per day seems right, a gentle but nevertheless steady pace, slower than an automobile but faster than a bicycle. Glass doesn't like to move this slowly. When we travel to Ontario—Guelph, Ontario—which is where he was born and where his parents and his two sisters and his one brother still live, utterly eschewing restlessness), we drive straight through, a marathon of pavement that unrolls in front of the car like a grey carpet, so that by the time we get there, we are seeing the stripes at the side of the road in our sleep. Like swimming, Glass believes in persistence, in arriving before they expect us.

34 And yes, he has a right to ask. Why am I here, inside a version of sea monster, very gentle really, rocking while I lick the sedulous veins of the gooseberries that I find to eat, while I dream the travels of this cetaceous creature. I am here because I bailed out, refused to cooperate, tried to say no, took a roundabout way. They offered me a good job, in Vancouver, but it was a castigating job, a job that required me to discipline a group of accountants who had been fudging numbers. I figured they deserved their punishment and it wasn't up to me to persuade them to re-do the figures, to set matters right and perform remorse and penitence, public announcements of regret—although they never return the bonuses they've banked. What bean counter is capable of contrition? Their apologies would be a sham, a palaver. And I would enable this fabrication? I claimed that I was busy with another contract, that I didn't have the skills to regulate such an unruly faction, and I fled, in the opposite direction entirely, to Winnipeg. This equivocation, Glass would say, is typical of me, an evader, a shadow boxer.

35 "Avoidance is an art," I assert.

36 "Avoidance is avoidance," he insists. "Better just say no and be done with it."

37 "But people always think that they're doing me a favour by asking me to serve as arbitrator, and they get so set on their request that they think my saying no is a slap in the face."

38 "All they ever ask you for is advice."

39 "Yes, and then, after I've spent six days giving it, they decide that they'll ignore what I say."

40 "Well, they're paying you for it."

41 "Yes, but they don't say thank you."

42 Glass gets impatient. "Put up a wall. Say no."

43 That's a good one. Put up a wall. We know the effect of walls.

44 I should explain. When I lost my job at Sea World, I became a free agent, self-employed you might say. My talents as a trained cetologist are few enough, but I know the trace of habit, of instinct, of badinage. And I can manage presentation quite well, those first three seconds when people make up their minds about candidates, applicants, or aspirants. I bill myself as an advisor for small problems. How to negotiate the treacherous shoals of a shrinking office. How to get ahead without jealousy. How to look insouciant when you are going in for the kill. How to look enigmatic afterwards. How to appeal to public sentiment so as to elicit forgiveness. It's much the same as Sea World. I don't mind getting splashed, as long as I'm not immersed in water. But my business is faltering because I was both too generous and too willing to engage with unsolvable complications. I offer too much, and of course, even the most skillful expert

gets taken for granted. The greater my dexterity, the less my proficiency is valued. And, I am increasingly grumpy that nobody ever says thank you.

- 45 So when this contract came along, this call to go to Vancouver and to fix that cardinal debacle, I answered but hemmed and hawed, thought about the mess and the process and the damage control, and then, perversely, decided I would go to Winnipeg, the opposite direction, where I pretended to have another, albeit smaller, job. In Tarshish, a small community by the shores of Lake Winnipeg, that inland sea, and not so far from Jaffa either. You can only get there by boat, those still old-fashioned and deep-bellied tubs that ply the Lake, so I bought a ticket and boarded, went below deck and, exhausted by assiduous avoidance, fell soundly asleep on one of the benches. I was for some reason bone weary, and so I just stretched out and abandoned consciousness. Glass had been waking me to look at the stars; the meteor showers were exquisite those nights, as if portending some extraordinary occurrence.
- 46 Even in slumber, I could feel the water getting rough, that old boat pitching and groaning as if to creak apart, and around me my fellow passengers—miners and geologists mostly—unable to control their retching, swallowing and swallowing and swallowing, and finally running to the one small toilet at the back of the bark. But I slept, one of those fathomless sleeps that leave a person loggish and completely slack, without regard for anything.
- 47 Half awake, I heard voices actually calling on god. Praying aloud. I always harboured a belief that when a ship goes down, the band keeps playing and the captain puts on a white dress uniform, but no, instead, every crew member and every passenger was calling on god, or God, or God, or GOD, or GOD, Christian or Muslim or Jew, Protestant or Catholic, in the innumerable languages that one is apt to find on the shores of Lake Winnipeg. It went from bad to worse when they starting throwing the cargo overboard, sacks of Canada Post mail, boxes of fresh bananas, at last even machine parts they were taking to Tarshish for the oil-rigs. While I dozed, groggy, registering some external confusion, but not quite sure it was real rather than metaphysical. Until the captain—wearing greasy khaki, not white duck with gold piping—came below and bellowed at us. I know his type, they blame every misfortune on someone else, sure that they are in the clear, have done everything they can to prove themselves blameless.
- 48 “OK, OK, what’s going on? Who’s the Jonah here?”
- 49 I swung my legs to the pitching floor, or the deck below deck, sat up and rubbed my eyes with my knuckles. Nobody answered him, their faces staring back green, and ready to lurch again.
- 50 “Who are you people? Why are we having a bloody hurricane when the weather forecast said clear and sunny skies, no wind? What does this mean?”
- 51 I didn’t want to confess that I was the one avoiding my contract, shirking responsibility again, so I shrugged and played innocent.
- 52 “And why aren’t you seasick?” He was shouting directly at me now. “Or at least praying a little?”
- 53 “I’m avoiding god.”
- 54 He was simply disgusted. “Well, get up and gamble with the rest of the crew. We need all hands on deck.”

- 55 On the forecastle the crew were bent against the gale-force winds, their shirts clinging to muscled backs that under other circumstances I might have appreciated (I'm not that faithful to Glass).
- 56 "Superstitious bastard," they muttered to me. "He thinks you're the cause of this, doesn't like taking women across the Lake."
- 57 Sure enough, I was the only woman on board boat. I hadn't noticed before, but I knew I could be in trouble with a zealot captain and a bunch of tough guys who had been throwing up in front of me. I could only pull a dog-eared deck of cards from my pocket and try to tell them to relax, that a good round of poker would do the trick, let the boat drift and we'd get through the storm.
- 58 Bad advice. The storm grew cyclonic. They decided to cast lots instead, to pull straws or toothpicks, and to pinpoint the problem that way. And I came up with the short straw, the losing winner, the only finger.
- 59 "It's you," stormed the captain. "Damn these new-fangled ways, they should never let women on board. And I should have known, recession be damned, to change my crew every year. Now we're paying for it."
- 60 "Well," I could hardly protest my gender, "why don't you just throw me overboard then?" It seemed to me an outrageous enough proposal, one that he would surely reject out of hand, his transport license revoked, his ship impounded, his reputation ruined, CBC cameras waiting on the dock. But no such luck.
- 61 "Good idea," he snarled.
- 62 But the crew were not so careless. "Who are you?" they asked. "Where do you come from? Why are you here? What is your occupation?"
- 63 Who can excuse avoidance? I had to tell them the truth, that I was afraid, that I was fed up, that I was tired of getting called up in the middle of the night and told to go and fix some insoluble problem, that Vancouver didn't need me to tell them to repent and say their sorries. That I was trying to build a wall.
- 64 The looks on their faces would have turned a pillow to stone. They stumbled back from me, aghast, their lips trembled, and their eyes filled with horror.
- 65 "Why didn't you go where you were supposed to go, where you were sent? This is the wrong time to build walls," one of them mourned. "What can we do for you, that will stop this storm?"
- 66 He was in tears, poor fellow, a nice man I could see, a father, maybe even a husband. And the gale was growing worse, the waves piling up on top of one another as if they were solid and not liquid, the foam lashed to a seething brown. You could say it was close to a hurricane, that storm, close enough to scare me too, because I knew, and how I knew this I don't know, that the only force that would stop the tempest would be my landlocked and absolutely hydrophobic body immersed in the pitiless waters of Lake Winnipeg.
- 67 "Throw me in."
- 68 They were silent, standing as still as was possible with the wind bowling at their bodies and tearing the very hair from their skins.
- 69 "Lift me up, like a sacrifice, and cast me into the water. It's my fault, I am sure."

- 70 But they hesitated, they were horrified at the thought, decided that they would head for shore, try to get to dry land. I could have told them that it would be useless, the elements were after me, even while they strained at their tasks, fighting to turn the ship around. The hurricane grew stronger, more insistent, now a deep call coming out of the throat of the wind.
- 71 To give them credit, they were shredded with misery. "We don't want to dump her overboard," they protested to the captain. "She hasn't done anything. We don't want to die for her soul."
- 72 "Pitch her," he said.
- 73 I was standing right there. I could have thrown myself on their mercy, I could have begged for a delay. But that captain made me so mad that I wanted to see him suffer, I wanted him up on unseamanship charges, I wanted him to lose his stripes, even if I had to drown to do it.
- 74 "Yes," I said. "Throw me in."
- 75 I'm no martyr, just aware of my endless culpability. My crazy guilt arises from decades of being wrong, all the time wrong, too mouthy, too dissatisfied, full of curses and imprecations, eager with demands, which all come back to haunt me, end up on my own head.
- 76 "Too much personality," says Glass. "Put a lid on it, stay cool."
- 77 "I can't stand the distance," I groan. "Why does everybody have to be so colourless, so damnably homogenized?"
- 78 "Welcome to the new world," he says. He can afford to be careless, he never has to lay himself on the line, play dirty or dumb; he can put his eye to the telescope lens and pass through troposphere, stratosphere, and mesosphere in a blink, instantly lost.
- 79 That was why I liked Sea World; everyone was looking at the whales, not at me, the trainer who clicked her tongue, held the bucket, doled out the fish as reward. But I never expected to become the very bait that I had once so pleasingly distributed, a quick bite for a whale's wide mouth.
- 80 They lifted me up, like a sacrifice, and they threw me into the water, that uncertain element I cannot tread, that raging sky that had come down to meet its own horizon. I drowned, and suddenly the storm was still, grew quiet from its rage, lay peaceful under a scud of quickly clearing clouds, drowned. The water came up to meet me and I slid into a sea's compass, its depth penetrating my soul. The weeds wrapped around my head, I went down to the roots of mountains, the hole in the bottom of the sea, the earth's shuttered gates. And yes, my life passed before my eyes, I remembered every detail of love and anger, every glance, every quiet touch, every word spoken.
- 81 I drowned and drowned.
- 82 And that is why I am here, inside the belly of this whale, the whale waiting when my poised and plummeting body hit the roiling surface of the water, the whale that followed my descent. Don't worry, I went under, I got my ears and nose and mouth full of that foul liquid, enough so that I coughed and spat my way down this whale's esophagus. It was there, mouth open, ready to swallow, as if I were a morsel of krill, as if I were a baby. It snapped me up from the bottom and swallowed me whole. And now we voyage across the prairies, a slow swim, me hydrophobic worse than ever (now that I have managed to drown twice), inside the swimming animal's safe warmth. I could

almost believe I was transposed to an illustration in the children's Bible that I had, of Jonah sitting in front of a fire, toasting his stockinged feet and having a mug of tea while he waited for the whale to land.

- 83 I am supposed to pray and lament, to pay for my evasions with the proper *nos culpa*. I am having trouble with that, but my host doesn't seem to be concerned, fins her way across the land as easily as she does the sea, and does not expect too much weeping and blubbering. Indeed, it does no good to moan and whimper in here, to argue that I will keep my contracts, pay my dues, my fare, make sacrifices, no longer spare myself the rod. I will be faithful to Glass; I will learn the names of all the constellations, even those visible from Australia, the Southern Cross and its neighbours. I will learn to swim. I will no longer drown so single-mindedly. But the truth is, I am content, saved from swimming, warm, dark, no one to call to me, and no one to listen to my own calling. The story is that I have only three days here, but I don't mind, it seems forever, a long long time. I know that the whale won't manage to make it to Vancouver at this speed, and I am likely to be vomited out between her rows of teeth onto the dry land of the foreland thrust sheets, those grey-green foothills, at Calgary. My home, with Glass expecting that I'll have tales of Tarshish to regale him with. In this womb, this hot and yonic vessel, I am perfectly content to voyage across the prairies, enjoying the sights as I have never been able to with Glass, speeding through in his Mustang, eager to hit Ontario and the Shield so that he knows he is getting somewhere.
- 84 And when I get to Calgary, will I then fly to Vancouver, that Nineveh I avoided? Will I cry in its ear? I don't think Vancouver has that much to repent of, besides closing Sea World and getting me fired, besides the cost of housing, and the way that the drivers dodge one another, besides the interminably narrow Lion's Gate Bridge. It's no more sinful than any other city, just Vancouver as it has always been, and the truth is, we are jealous, sitting in our prairie cities, despite our cleaner air, our cheaper rents and cheaper gas, we really want to live in beguiling Vancouver, and that is the cause of our wish to impose reforms, to get them into sackcloth and ashes. The city can repent without me, and, expert at fasting and deprivation, at turning from one illusion to the next, it will, certainly, eventually. Vancouver is always spared destruction, recession, bankruptcy. They miss the bitterness the rest of us drink, here on the prairie grasslands, waiting for the weather to improve, for the crops to flourish, for the water to rise.
- 85 And when they do, repent that is, get spared again, I am determined I will sulk. All that work, all that drowning and drowning and being swallowed and burped up again, I will be furious, once again my advice ignored, no thanks, no payment, just a casual, "Well, I've changed my mind." This damnable compassion, this damnable kindness, such bitter justice for my evasions, my out-of-the-way travels. Once again, I'll wish I had drowned, I'll climb the coulee ridge of Nose Hill and sit myself under a sukkah, drown in the desert of prairie, blister in the hot August sun until my skin peels like a grape. Despite Glass's coaxing, despite him coming out to visit me with cans of cold Labatt's beer, despite him saying, as he will say, "Is it a good thing for you to be hurt so deeply? Chill out, Jonna."
- 86 "Why should I? This is why I lit out for Tarshish. I drowned for this, and all for nothing."
- 87 And Glass, poor fellow, will zigzag down the hill again and wish that I were back at Sea World. He will phone the zoo and ask if there's an opening, could I take care of the

beaver and muskrats, any water mammals needing trainers? The zoo will tell him no they are closed, they've recently been flooded and need to repair the damage.

88 So, call me Jonna.

89 It's true, from the top of Nose Hill you can see Vancouver, on a crystal prairie day you can see to the other side of the Rockies.

90 And over me a castor-oil plant will grow, over me a gourd will grow, over me a sage bush spicy and green will flourish, a cooling shadow that will turn me from my bitterness, and from my repeated and never satisfied dissatisfaction. My mood will lift with the moon looming over the Rockies; I will begin to enjoy myself. And when the gourd gets worms I will suffer for it, and when the castor-oil plant is attacked I will cry for it, and when the sage bush withers, I will mourn. And again I will wish to drown, to die for lack of shade and respite. The wind will rise, an eastern desert wind that blows grains of sand against my raw skin. The sun will grow fierce, more brilliantly strong minute by minute, and I will again pray for death to come and fetch me from this new drowning.

91 And then her voice will say, "Can it be a good thing that you hurt so deeply? Can it be a good thing that the sage bush wilts into dryness through your anger?"

92 At first I will not answer.

93 And then, falling into a daze, wishing that I were finally and thoroughly drowned, I will cry out, "It would be a good thing to be dead."

94 To which her question will repeat itself. "Can it be a good thing that you are hurt so deeply, and only by your own compassion?"

95 "It is a good thing to be hurt deeply, until I am dead like the sage bush, which is more like me than I am like myself, dry, prickly, tough, an aromatic survivor of the prairie wind. Unforgiving, a gatherer of wool, a happy weed, an herb, a spice for fowl, hard-working, unappreciated, endlessly used."

96 She will chuckle then, the same low sound as the grumbles of the whale around me. "You care for this sage bush, the sudden child of night and yet in one night gone. That is compassion, and you, Jonna, are cursed to drown in it. Go home, sleep well, and do not question sage bushes or whales again."

97 And that will be the end. I'll go home and Glass will be happy to see me, will offer me a rye and ginger on the back porch, will rub my neck. And once it gets dark, he will point out Cetus, which is visible from both hemispheres, the great fish of the abyss swallowing its own heaven, mother to those who drown and those who swim.

98 But for now, here in the belly of my new mother, inside a fish body that cradles me on this voyage across a country, I am content. Mother of Samuramat, Derceto wombs me on this drowning journey, from which I will alight, onto a stony ground, a dry land. They say my story was written by a woman, to ironize prophecy and its male conventions. They say this legend is a cautionary tale against literalness. They say this is an outsider's parable of exile. They even say that Jonah was a man, and the whale a monster. They say a Jonah brings misfortune upon his companions. They say that those of us who are impatient and evasive, who seek a gratification impossible to find, cannot discern between our right hand and our left. Woe to those who seek to pour oil upon waters brewed into a gale. Woe to those of us who seek to please rather than appall. Woe to those of us who, in this world, court not disaster.

- 99 But here within my hot, dark, matrix, my dolphin's delphos, my leviathan's source, submarine, subterranean, I am at last, drowning, at land.
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APPENDIXES

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Aritha van Herk is the author of fiction, non-fiction, and hundreds of reviews, articles, and historical narratives. She has written five novels: *Judith*, *The Tent Peg*, *No Fixed Address* (nominated for the Governor General's Award for fiction), *Places Far From Ellesmere* (a georafictione) and *Restlessness*. Her irreverent *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta* frames the permanent exhibition on Alberta history at the Glenbow Museum, and was the inaugural book in the One Book/One City, Calgary Public Library initiative. In *This Place* (with George Webber), she develops the idea of geographical temperament as tonal accompaniment; she has just published another collaboration with George Webber entitled *Prairie Gothic*. As part of Calgary 2012 she was a Cultural Ambassador and Artist in Residence at the Calgary Stampede. She is University Professor and Professor of English at the University of Calgary, Alberta, the recipient of many awards, a Member of the Alberta Order of Excellence and a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.